Journal of Pragmatics 10 (1986) 281–286
North-Holland

INTRODUCTION

The Background of Japanese Sociolinguistics

Sachiko IDE*

Studies of language in Japan abound with hundreds of articles, books, and research reports published every year. The main interest of the field is concentrated on linguistic variety according to regions, and on speech behavior in daily life. The former is referred to as dialectology, the latter as studies of *gengo seikatsu* (literally translated as 'language life'). These two constitute the major part of Japanese work in sociolinguistics.

Except for the general surveys in English by Grootaers (1982) and Sibata (1985), consisting of summaries of the findings of what are, in fact, voluminous research results, the work done by Japanese sociolinguists is virtually unknown to non-Japanese readers. The reason is probably that this work has developed independently of the Western disciplines, as well as the fact that the major part of the research has been carried out by the National Language Research Institute, whose primary concern was, at least until recently, a description of the Japanese language which would be primarily useful for the Japanese.

The fact that Japanese researchers have worked independently of the Western tradition has inevitably resulted in unique assumptions, orientations, or approaches when viewed from an international perspective. Students trained in the Western academic tradition may wonder about this, and why sociolinguistics in Japan is so different. The purpose of this introduction, therefore, is to try to describe the general background of sociolinguistics in Japan, thus explaining the assumptions underlying the articles in this issue. My intention is to highlight what the Japanese work may have to offer non-Japanese readers; I shall confine myself here to those writings which are as yet unknown.

Japanese sociolinguistics has developed its own discipline independently of foreign influences. The origin dates back to 1949, when the National Language Research Institute was founded for the purpose of 'doing scientific research on the Japanese Language and on the speech behavior in the daily life of the Japanese people, as well as establishing solid bases for improving the Japanese Language'. (Article one of the legal document establishing the Institute.) Since its founding, the Institute has constantly conducted a number of research

* Author's address: S. Ide, Japan Women's University, English Department, 2–8–1 Mejiro-dai, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 112, Japan.

projects, and because of the varieties of its research and the number of active researchers involved, it has affected much of the sociolinguistic work outside the Institute by providing guidelines for research methodologies, as well as by setting implicit common goals. It is to be noted here that the Institute, having been established for such purposes, has been primarily concerned with topics serving the benefit of language users and policy makers. Sibata, one of the prominent leaders in the early period of the Institute and a chief promotor of the subsequent development of the discipline, writes: 'Sociolinguistics should not be a discipline serving only sociolinguistics itself. Instead, it should be a discipline which attempts to solve problems of actuality' (1978: 8).

It should be clear from this what is meant by sociolinguistics in Japan. The major part of it is the study of *gengo seikatsu* (cf. Grootaers (1982), Sibata (1985)), which is understood as: 'the study of speech behavior in daily life'. Among the various aspects of speech behavior, regional varieties of linguistic forms, such as in pronunciation and vocabulary, are investigated. *Gengo seikatsu* also refers to the study of language varieties according to social status, age, sex, education, etc., which have been traditionally dealt with in Japan as a branch of dialectology. Thus, sociolinguistics and dialectology mutually overlap.

The aim of the study of Japanese sociolinguistics is to provide a total description of the speech behavior of the people in a speech community. It attempts to provide an overall picture of the linguistic aspect of people's daily life.

The significance of sociolinguistic surveys is found in the problems they approach: for example, what is the status of speech behavior of the people of multi-regional origins in big cities; has the use of honorifics decreased; how has language use changed in parallel with the modernization of the society, etc. The findings of the surveys on those problems are expected to be useful in predicting future speech behavior. They are assumed to serve as the academic foundations for making practical language policies, among which the major one is that of language standardization.

In the case of the sociolinguistic surveys of big cities (Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyuujo (1981)), for example, the knowledge of grammar, the choices of proper expressions for various situations, the evaluational judgment of various language varieties, and information affecting social behavior of the subjects were elicited by interviewing about a thousand people. The massive data resulting from this survey were analyzed along various dimensions and published in two volumes (a total of 624 pages), illustrated with numerous graphs, charts, figures, and maps. Researchers often say, 'Let the data show the facts'. The immediate goal of sociolinguistics is, as we see in this example, to describe the complex realities of speech behavior as they are.

It is from these multiple descriptions that we can grasp the realities of speech

material for making inferences about the future of speech behavior. While tl immediate goal may be limited to this, Japanese sociolinguists have an implic understanding that beyond these multiple descriptions they share other fa reaching goals, viz. to seek out which factors cause language varieties, and discover patterns of social behavior through speech behavior.

The basic assumption of Japanese sociolinguistics is that language is diffe ent from individual to individual, rather than from group to group. Siba states that we begin our research on the assumption that users of the san language do not necessarily have the same variety of language (1978: ii). Th means that researchers do not begin their research by looking into the varieti of language used by people, grouped by some pre-established categories su as social class, sex, etc. Instead, they look into the language varieties of a individual in a speech community, as they are used in daily life. Then, th analyze the data, so that in what looks like a continuum of varieties, t boundaries of these varieties may be found, and the appropriate variabl chosen. This runs contrary to the assumption of sociolinguistics in the We which investigates linguistic varieties, while focusing on predetermined li guistic and social variables.

Whereas researchers in the West investigate, for the most part, the correl tion of language *and* society, the Japanese investigate language *in* society. T difference may be due to the different ways of looking at language: in t West, it is viewed as a separate object to be investigated in relation to socie while in Japan it is seen as part and parcel of human social behavior.

One of the striking characteristics of Japanese sociolinguistics is the size its surveys. The numbers of subjects or informants are usually of the order several hundreds. Such large numbers of subjects are considered to be need to show the possible multiple variables involved in varieties of speech behavi (cf. Nomoto (1981: 14)), and to ensure statistical reliability.

Usually, projects are conducted as follows: a speech community is chose and subjects are picked by random sampling. Data are normally collected fro multiple angles. In a questionnaire, subjects are asked about their knowled attitudes, opinions, and their own introspective judgments on local dialects speech behavior, as well as such social information as their degree of expos to the mass media, or what political parties they support.

The methods of collecting data are also of different kinds. For example, ir survey conducted from 1952 through 1954, various methods were applie Among them were questionnaires, interviews, observation in experimen settings, the recording of speech behavior in a certain natural setting, and t recording of the 24-hour speech behavior of a single person. These metho have opened up possible new ways for subsequent sociolinguistic surveys.

A team of 10 to 20 (in the case of one survey of big cities, as many as researchers and a number of assistants normally participate in a project. team consists of linguists, sociologists, and statisticians. Not all projects c

afford to have such a number and variety of researchers, but the custom of conducting a survey by a multi-disciplinary team has brought to sociolinguistics a common perspective from both the sociological and statistical fields.

Since the research is conducted inductively, the analyses of the masses of data are directed toward producing some pictures of the complex realities of speech behavior. Statistical analyses of various kinds are applied so as to visualize the immanent patterns of complex phenomena in the form of numbers (percentages, averages, standard deviations, significant differences, etc.), figures, graphs, and maps. Analyses of variance and multi-variate analysis are among the several statistical techniques employed for grasping patterns in the data. Besides such standard packages as the SPSS or the BMD, several computer programs specially developed for sociolinguistic analysis are used. Among these are programs for the quantification of politeness of linguistic forms, and for plotting dialect features on maps.

It is not difficult to imagine how frustrated non-Japanese readers may feel when reading the works of Japanese sociolinguistics, mainly because of the lack of theoretical orientation. In fact, there is no theoretical framework or model on which the surveys are designed; neither is there any attempt to set up rules, nor any argument over the theoretical implications of individual findings. Such findings are not integrated in order to arrive at general conclusions, but are merely listed. While the Japanese way of doing sociolinguistics may seem to suffer from methodological shortcomings, seen from a Western perspective, it has been considered as the most reasonable approach, given the rising stage of its inquiry into far-reaching problems of speech behavior.

The Japanese way in sociolinguistics may also reflect the Japanese people's sensitive concern for their language in daily life. With the exception of the Ainu, the Japanese population is homogeneous and monolingual, a fact which makes people sensitive to even small differences within their language. Differences are notably recognized on speech levels, as well as in regional varieties. People are interested in language varieties and the proper use of them. Research topics for sociolinguistic scholars often arise from such mundane, popular interests.

If Japanese research were to be done with a more theoretical orientation, findings of a greater depth could certainly be obtained. While this would make our research intellectually more entertaining, it would not provide the overall description of the realities of speech behavior of daily life with which Japanese sociolinguists have been principally concerned.

This is not intended to justify such an a-theoretical orientation; Japanese sociolinguistics would certainly benefit by acquiring the virtues of a theoretical approach. On the other hand, the Japanese way might represent a valuable addition for those who are not contented with the somewhat ethnocentric and/or doctrinaire approach of many sociolinguistic theories in the West, by

theoretical approach. Thus, the Japanese way could provide a cultiva ground on which balanced theories might be set up and made to flourish.

To conclude this introduction, I will briefly comment on the individ contributions. Starting from the end, the review article of Takesi Sibat (1978) book, *Problems of sociolinguistics*, introduces the major topics de with by this researcher. During the early years of the National Langu Research Institute, Sibata promoted many sociolinguistic projects. Later, taught at different universities, where he inspired a number of students w have become the active sociolinguists of today. His interests were too vari and his ideas were too flexible to set up any rigid framework for the discipli but his enthusiastic activities as well as his humanistic attitude toward spe behavior have set the direction for, and laid the groundwork of, mod Japanese sociolinguistics. The review article should reveal the scope of sociolinguistic topics and approaches.

Three articles in this issue, though none of them can be called representat examples of the Japanese sociolinguistics described above, are under influence of this tradition. For readers unfamiliar with the Japanese orier tion, it may be worthwhile to point out the main features of the Japan approach, as observed in these articles.

Common to them is the fact that the individual surveys are designed answer general questions of speech behavior. Thus, Fumio Inoue endeavor answer the question of who are the promoters of a 'new dialect'; Motoko H attempts to find out in what sense women use politer linguistic forms, a Beverly Hill et al. (a mixed team of researchers trained in Japan and Nc America) set out to discover how Americans and Japanese, respectively, polite expressions. They all used questionnaires for data collection, thro which self-reported data of subjects were obtained. Their surveys invol large number of subjects (Inoue 636; Hori 527, and Hill et al. 1115), and results represent findings of various kinds, seen from multiple angles. If readers keep the above-mentioned traits of Japanese sociolinguistics in mi this may help to appreciate the work presented in this issue.

In particular, Inoue discusses the phenomenon named 'change from bel by Labov, by using Japanese data. Besides geographical variables, he inv gates the types of characters of speakers who are the promoters of the ' dialect', and tries to find sources for this linguistic change from a perspective. Hori analyzes the linguistic forms used by men and women compares levels of politeness. Hill et al. challenge the universal hypothesi linguistic politeness as proposed by Brown & Levinson and Leech, u empirical evidence from a large-scale survey conducted in North America Japan. Since this survey was based on a Japanese-centered hypothesis linguistic politeness, the article may be read as a complementary contribu to the Western approach to universals of linguistic politeness.

Finally, the introductory essay by Leo Loveday provides an extensive overview of work done in Japanese sociolinguistics for the past 30–40 years, giving full historical and bibliographical particulars.

References

Grootaers, Willem A., 1982. Dialectology and sociolinguistics: a general survey. Lingua 57: 327–355.

Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyuujo, 1981. Daitoshi no gengo seikatsu. [The language life of big cities.] Tokyo: Sanseidoo.

Nomoto, Kikuo, 1981. 'Mokuteki to igi.' ['Purposes and significance'.] In: The National Language Research Institute, ed., Daitoshi no gengo seikatsu: Bunseki-hen. [The language life of big cities: Analysis.] Tokyo: Sanseidoo. pp. 1–8.

Sibata, Takesi, 1978. Shakaigengogaku no kadai. [Problems of Sociolinguistics.] Tokyo: Sanseidoo.

Sibata, Takesi, 1985. Sociolinguistic surveys in Japan: approaches and problems. International Journal of the Sociology of Language 55: 79–88.